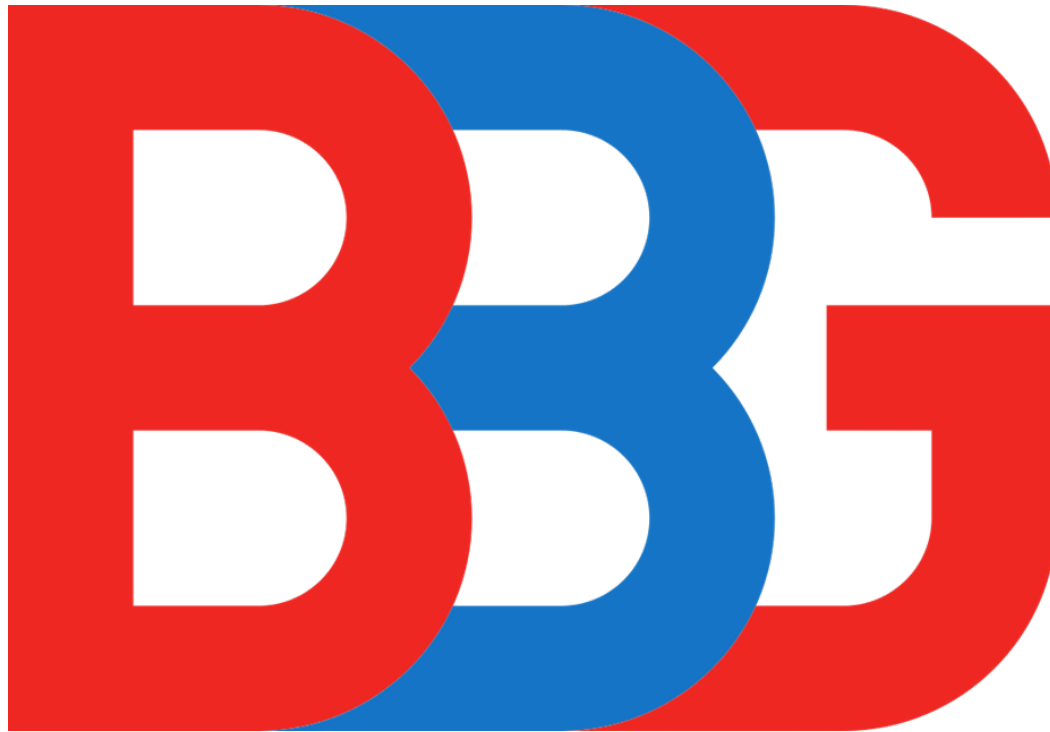


# THE CONVERSATION

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## Fixing America's voice to enhance foreign policy

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The logo is bold but the BBG is in a mess. BBG

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One of the US federal government's most notoriously troubled agencies, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), suffered a serious public relations setback in early March when its newly hired CEO, Andrew Lack, quit after only 42 days in the position.

Lack, famous for taking on tough jobs, once declared "I'm usually offered jobs where there is something big and broken." He is now headed back to his previous employer, NBC, where he is tasked with damage control following the Brian Williams fiasco.

Meanwhile, "big and broken" remains a decidedly apt description of the BBG. And that is a big problem for the United States and its foreign policy.

### The biggest federal agency you may not have heard of

The BBG is certainly big.

Operating with a budget of more than \$700 million and producing content in more than 60 languages, the Broadcasting Board of Governors is, in practice, one of the world's largest media organizations.

Tasked with “inform(ing), engag(ing) and connect(ing) people around the world in support of freedom and democracy,” the agency's job is to tell foreign audiences about the United States through the operation and oversight of five US government-sponsored international broadcasters (USIB): Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Radio/TV Marti (for Cuba), and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks.

The BBG is also definitely broken.

The reasons for what some have called the agency's “strategic dysfunction” are many, but among them is surely the fact that, prior to Lack's appointment, there had never been a single decision maker responsible for the BBG. Instead, the organization was governed by a part-time board of nine members.

Lack was to have served as the organization's first ever CEO and had been hailed as a much-needed savior who could protect the organization from itself.

That the actual governing board for the BBG is only occasionally fully populated – due to long delays between resignations and new appointments from the White House – and that the board's meetings have sometimes even failed to reach a quorum only adds to the dysfunction.

So, too, does the fact that morale at the agency, as measured in The Best Places to Work in the Federal Government annual survey, is routinely among the lowest in the government, with particularly abysmal marks for management's fairness and effectiveness.

In many ways the agency is indeed, as former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton once declared, “practically defunct.”

## Secretary Clinton Testifies: BBG is Defunct





Speaking plain.

## How did this come about?

For years, the BBG's difficulties have been a topic of discussion among observers of US international broadcasting.

As a former US diplomat and a researcher whose work focuses on the practice of public diplomacy, I've been especially interested in the challenges facing this little-known federal agency that operates at the intersection of journalism and foreign policy.

Although the US government has been engaged in international broadcasting since World War II, the BBG wasn't formed until 1994, the intention being to unify US efforts and ensure the strength and coherence of American messaging in the post-Cold War world.

In the years since its creation, the BBG has operated without a single authorized decision maker at the helm. The results have been predictable, with turf wars on funding for selected languages, ill-conceived decisions about how to deliver content and regular Congressional interference – just a few of the organization's many difficulties. The need for reform, likely imposed from the outside, has long been clear.

The creation of a CEO position offered a glimmer of hope that the organization was entering a period of improved management, increased transparency and better outcomes overall.

Now, however, the failure of Mr Lack to last more than six weeks on the job can only be seen as further evidence of the need for closer legislative oversight of this important, albeit low-profile, foreign policy agency.

That the BBG doesn't have a higher domestic profile is a function of legislation, only recently amended, that prevented USIBs from circulating their content in the US. Over time, these changes may lead to increased visibility, perhaps changing the fact that at present, as *The New York Times* once wrote,

*“The United States government may be the largest broadcaster that few Americans know about.”*

For now, however, while the BBG may remain low profile, the implications of its myriad problems are significant.

## Why the BBG matters

In an international environment where Russia’s 24/7 news channel, Russia Today, is successfully managing much of the message on Ukraine, where ISIS is busily recruiting adherents in places where the American message isn’t getting through, and where China’s CCTV America and Africa are targeting audiences in places which USIB seems to give short shrift, it is more important than ever for the United States to have an effective organization overseeing creation and distribution of content that functions both as an instrument of foreign policy and as a testament to journalistic freedom.

Recognizing these facts, last year the Republican-controlled House passed legislation intended to “enhance the missions, objectives and effectiveness” of US international broadcasting. The Democrat-controlled Senate never took action.



In early March, however, Representative Ed Royce (R-CA), chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee announced his intention to reintroduce similar legislation in 2015.

This time around, a Republican-led Senate may be more receptive to the effort.

Adding to the potential for success in this session is the fact that the administration seems open to working with Congress on reforming international broadcasting.

More of the cards are now stacked in favor of getting the legislative job done.

## Advancing vital US interests

Edward Royce: a man with a plan. Unknown

Each of the five broadcasters under the BBG’s umbrella has its own mission and budget. Each also has its own relationships with both Congress and foreign audiences.

Voice of America, for example, is globally oriented and focused on telling America's story to the world. Its mission is supported – more or less – across the US foreign policy community.

In contrast, Radio and Television Marti are focused specifically on Cuba, and are considered by some to be “taxpayer-funded relics controlled by Cuban exiles that too often slide into propaganda.”

Reforming any of one of these broadcasters would be a challenging, politically thorny task. Reforming the agency responsible for overseeing all of them is a massive undertaking.

It is rendered only more challenging by the fact that, at least as originally conceived, only Voice of America is formally charged with representing the United States and its policies abroad.

The other channels are intended to function as surrogate broadcasters, providing news and information not only about the United States but also about the world, and the less-than-free political environments into which the broadcasts are directed (ie Cuba or China). The storied role of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and its work behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War is a classic example of a surrogate broadcaster in action.

Today, there are still many countries with less-than-free media environments and USIB continues to produce content directed toward audiences in those places, but evidence of these broadcasters' success can be spotty. There have also been, on occasion, worries about adherence to journalistic standards.

More broadly, concerns persist that the five broadcasters are not up to the task of competing with the messages about American culture, values, and priorities conveyed by commercial media like *The New York Times* or *The Huffington Post* – let alone by foreign entities dedicated to misrepresenting American intentions in the international environment.

Some scholars even argue that the US government has already abdicated responsibility for public diplomacy to Hollywood and its “distorted picture of freedom and democracy.”

For all these reasons I support Congressional efforts to reform USIB. International broadcasting is a critically important – and highly visible – tool in the American public diplomacy tool box. In today's complicated international communication environment there is no excuse for the United States not to have more streamlined, better governed and more responsive means for telling America's story to the world.

Speaking about U.S. international broadcasting in 2011, former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs James K. Glassman noted:

*“My view has always been that [USIB] is journalism with purpose, not, as many have argued, to burnish the US image, but rather, to advance vital US interests.”*

It's past time to fix the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

*To read more about Russia Today and the Russian government's media strategy click here.*

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